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THE POETRY OF LUCRETIUS

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THE
POETRY OF LUCRETIUS

A LECTURE

DELIVERED AT THE JOHN RYLANDS LIBRARY ON THE
14TH FEBRUARY, 1917

By

C. H. HERFORD, M.A., LL.D.

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE IN THE UNIVERSITY
OF MANCHESTER

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Frances Sattler

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THE POETRY OF LUCRETIUS.

BY C. H. HERFORD, M.A., LITT.D.,

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE IN THE
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

Dedicated to the
Rt. Hon. VISCOUNT MORLEY, OM

Carillon of the University of Manchester

Lucr^{et}e stands alone in the controversial force and energy with which the genius of originality
inspires him, and transforms into sublime reason for him act, so long as living breath is ours,
the thought that the life of a man is no more than the dream of a shadow.

V. Morley, "R. Lecture."

L.

THERE was a time when the title of this paper would have been received as a paradox if not as a contradiction in terms. Lessing, as is well known, declared roundly that Lucretius was "a versifier, not a poet," and Lessing was one of the greatest of European critics. It is easy, indeed, to see the reason of Lessing's trenchant condemnation. It reflects his implicit acceptance of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which he said was for him as absolutely valid as Euclid, and therefore of Aristotle's doctrine that poetry is imitation of human action. Lessing's insistence on this doctrine was extraordinarily salutary in his day, and definitely lowered the status of the dubious kinds known as descriptive, allegorical, satirical, and didactic poetry, in a century too much given to them all. That phrase of his about the imitation of human action marked out a correct, well-defined, and sole channel for the stream of poetry to pursue, and some of the slender poetic rills of his generation improved their chance of survival by falling into it and flowing between its banks. But Lessing did not reckon with the power of poetic genius to force its own way to the sea through no matter how tangled and

An elaboration of the Lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library
on 14 February, 1917

tortuous a river-bed, — nay, to capture from the very obstructions it overcomes new splendours of foam and rainbow unknown perhaps to the well-regulated stream. In plain language, he did not reckon with the fact that a *prima facie* inferior form, such as satire or didactic, may not only have its inferiority outweighed by compensating beauties, but may actually elicit and provoke beauties not otherwise to be had, and thus become not an obstacle, but an instrument of poetry. Nor did he foresee that such a recovery of poetic genius, such an effacement of the old boundaries, such a withdrawal of the old taboos, was to come with the following century, nay, was actually impending when he wrote. Goethe, who read the *Laokoon* entranced, as a young student at Leipzig, honoured its teaching very much on this side of idolatry when he came to maturity. As a devoted investigator of Nature, who divined the inner continuity of the flower and the leaf with the same penetrating intuition which read the continuity of a man, or of a historic city, in all the phases of their growth, Goethe was not likely to confine poetry within the bounds either of humanity or of the drums and tramplings, the violence, passion, and sudden death, for which human action in poetic criticism has too commonly stood. He himself wrote a poem of noble beauty on the "Metamorphosis of Plants" (1797)—a poem which suffices to show that it is possible to be poetically right while merely unfolding the inner truth of things in perfectly adequate speech.¹ We cannot wonder, then, that Lucretius and the poem "On the Nature of Things" excited in the greatest of German poets the liveliest interest and admiration. On the score of subject alone he eagerly welcomed the great example of Lucretius. But he saw that Lucretius had supreme gifts as a poet, which would have given distinction to whatever he wrote, and which, far from being balked by the subject of his choice, found in it peculiarly large scope and play. "What sets our Lucretius so high," he wrote (1821) to his friend v. Knebel, author of the first German translation. "what sets him so high and assures him eternal renown, is a lofty faculty of sensuous intuition, which enables him to describe with power ; in

¹ Goethe probably never heard of a less fortunate adventure in that kind by his English contemporary Dr. Erasmus Darwin, the *Loves of the Plants*, which had then been famous in England for ten years; a poem which suffices to show that it is possible to exploit in the description of natural processes all the figures and personifications of poetry, and yet to go egregiously wrong.

addition, he disposes of a powerful imagination, which enables him to pursue what he has seen beyond the reach of sense into the invisible depths of Nature and her most mysterious recesses." But while Goethe thus led the way in endorsing without reserve the Lucretian conception of what the field of poetry might legitimately include, he contributed to the discussion nothing, so far as I know, so illuminating or so profound as the great saying of Wordsworth: "poetry is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science". For Wordsworth here sweeps peremptorily away the boundary marks set up, for better or worse, by ancient criticism—he knows nothing of a poetry purely of man or purely of action: he finds the *differentia* of poetry not in any particular choice of subject out of the field of real things, but in the *impassioned* handling of them whence-soever drawn, and therefore including the impassioned handling of reality as such, or, in the Lucretian phrase, of *the nature of things*.

What did he mean by *impassioned*? Something more, certainly, than the enthusiasm of a writer possessed with his theme, or even of one eager, as Lucretius was, to effect by its means a glorious purgation in the clotted soul of a friend. We come nearer when we recall the profound emotion stirred in Wordsworth by "earth's tears and mirth, her humblest mirth and tears," or the thought, "too deep for tears," given him by the lowliest flower of the field. Such passion as this is not easily analysed, but it implies something that we may call participation on the one side and response on the other. The poet finds himself in Nature, finds there something that answers to spiritual needs of his own. The measure of the poet's mind will be the measure of the value of the response he receives. A small poet will people Nature with fantastic shapes which reflect nothing but his capricious fancy or his self-centred desires. That is not finding a response in Nature, but putting one into her mouth; a procedure like that of the bustling conversationalist who, instead of listening to your explanation, cuts it short with a "You mean to say" whatever it suits him to suppose. But the poet of finer genius will neither seek nor be satisfied with such hollow response as this. If he finds himself in Nature, it will not be his shallow fancies or passing regrets that he finds, but his furthest reach, and loftiest appetency of soul. He will not properly be said to "subdue things to the mind," as Bacon declared it to be

To Knebel, 14 February, 1821

the characteristic aim of poetry to do, instead of, like philosophy, subduing the mind to things. But he will feel after analogies to mind in the universe of things which mind contemplates and interprets.

Such an analogy, for instance, is the sense of *continuity* underlying the changing show of the material world, corresponding to the continuity of our own self-consciousness through the perpetual variations of our soul states. The doctrine of a permanent substance persisting through the multiplicity of Nature, and giving birth to all its passing modes, belongs as much to poetry as to philosophy, and owes as much to impassioned intuition as to *a priori* thought. Under the name of the "One and the Many" the problem of Change and Permanence perplexed and fascinated every department of Greek thought : it provoked the opposite extravagances of Heracleitos, who declared change to be the only form of existence, and of the Eleatics, who denied that it existed at all, but it also inspired the ordered and symmetrical beauty of the Parthenon and the Pindaric ode. "When we feel the poetic thrill," says Santayana, "it is when we find fulness in the concise, and depth in the clear ; and that seems to express with felicitous precision the genius of Hellenic art."

A second such analogy is the discovery of *infinity*. Common sense observes measure and rule, complies with custom, and takes its ease when its day's work is done ; but we recognize a higher quality in the love that knows no measure, in the spiritual hunger and thirst which are never stilled. Therefore, at the height of our humanity, we find ourselves in the universe in proportion as it sustains and gives scope for an endlessly ranging and endlessly penetrating thought. The Stoics looked on the universe as a globe pervaded by what Munro unkindly calls *a rotund and rotatory god* ; at the circumference of which all existence, including that of space, simply stopped ; common sense revolts, but imagination is even more rudely balked, and we glory in the defiant description of Epicurus passing beyond the flaming walls of the world. Yet we are stirred with a far more potent intellectual sympathy when the idea is suggested, say by Spinoza, that space and time themselves are but particular modes of a universe which exists also in an infinite number of other ways ; or when, in the final cantos of Dante's *Paradiso*, after passing up from Earth, the centre, through the successive ever-widening spheres

that circle round it, till we reach the Empyrean, the whole perspective and structure of the universe are suddenly inverted, and we see the real centre, God, as a single point of dazzling intensity, irradiating existence "through and through". Then we realize that the space we have been laboriously traversing is only the illusive medium of our sense-existence, and without meaning for the Eternity and Infinity of divine reality.

This example has led us to the verge of another class of poetic ideas, those in which poetry discovers in the world not merely analogies of mind, but mind itself. This is the commonest, and in some of its phases the cheapest and poorest, intellectually, of all poetic ideas. It touches at one pole the naive personation which peoples earth and air for primitive man with spirits whom he seeks by ritual and magic to propitiate or to circumvent. The brilliant and beautiful wool of myth is, if we will, poetry as well as religion; the primitive and rudimentary poetry of a primitive and rudimentary religion. Yet it points, however crudely, to the subtler kinds of response which a riper poetic insight may discover. If the glorious anthropomorphism of Olympus and Asgard has faded for ever, the mystery of life, everywhere pulsing through Nature, and perpetually reborn "in man and beast and earth and air and sea," cries to the poet in every moment of his experience with a voice which will not be put by, and [the symbols from soul-life by which he seeks to convey his sense of it, if they often read human personality too definitely into the play of that elusive mystery, yet capture something in it which escapes the reasoned formulas of science, and justify the claim of poetic experience to be the source of an outlook upon the world, of a vision of life, with which, no less than with those reached through philosophy and religion, civilization has to reckon.

The poetic consciousness of soul has thus left a deep impress upon the medium of ideas through which we currently regard both Nature and Man. It has imbued with a richer significance and a livelier appeal those analogies in Nature of which I spoke, turning the sublime but bare conceptions of continuity and substance into Wordsworth's *something more deeply interfused*, or Shelley's *Love . . . through the web of Being blinlly wove*—turning the abstraction of infinity into limitless aspiration, or into that "infinite passion" which Browning felt across "the pain of finite hearts that yearn".

On the other hand, in its interpretation of Man, the poetic soul-consciousness, so extraordinarily intense on the emotional and imaginative side, has lifted these aspects of soul into prominence ; illuminating and sustaining everywhere the impassioned insight which carries men outside and beyond themselves, in heroism, in prophecy, in creation, in love ; which makes the past alive for them, and the future urgent ; which lifts them to a vision of good and evil beyond that of moral codes ; to the perception that danger is the true safety, and death, as Rupert Brooke said, “ safest of all ” ; which in a word gives wing and scope and power to that in man which endures, as the stream endures though its water is ever gliding on, and makes us “ feel that we are greater than we know ”.

I have tried to sketch out some of the ways in which a scientific poetry is possible without disparagement to either element in the description. Let me now proceed to apply some of these ideas to the great poet of science who is our immediate subject.

II.

In this assembly it is unnecessary to recall the little that is told, on dubious authority, of the life which began a little less than a hundred years before the Christian era, and ended when he was not much over forty, when Virgil was a very young man. All that is told of his life is the story that he went mad after receiving a love-philtre, composed the books of his great poem “ On the Nature of Things ” in his lucid intervals, and finally died by his own hand. It is this tradition which Tennyson with great art has worked up into his noble poem. We need not here discuss the truth either of the tradition of madness or of that of suicide. What is certain is that no poem in the world bears a more powerful impress of coherent and continuous thought. While the poets of his own time and of the next generation, though deeply interested in his poetry and in his ideas, know nothing of the tragic story which first emerges in a testimony four centuries later.

Lucretius called his poem by the bald title “ Of the Nature of Things ”. But no single term or phrase can describe the aims which, distinct but continually playing into and through one another, compose the intense animating purpose of the book. We may say that it is at once a scientific treatise, a gospel of salvation, and an epic of

nature and man ; yet we are rarely conscious of any one of these aims to the exclusion of the rest. In none of these three aims was Lucretius wholly original. In each of them he had a great precursor among the speculative thinkers and poets of Greece. His science roughly speaking was the creation of Democritus, his gospel of salvation was the work of Epicurus ; and the greatest example of a poem on the nature of things, before his, had been given by Empedocles, the poet-philosopher of Agrigentum whom Matthew Arnold made the mouthpiece of his grave and lofty hymn of nineteenth-century pessimism. In his own country his only predecessor in any sense was Ennius, the old national poet who had first cast the hexameter in the stubborn mould of Latin speech, to whom he pays characteristically generous homage.

The atomic system of Democritus, which explained all things in the universe as combinations of different kinds of material particles, was a magnificent contribution to physical science, and the fertility of its essential idea is still unexhausted. It touched the problems of mind and life, of ethics and art, only indirectly, in so far as it resolved mind and all its activities into functions of matter and motion. Epicurus, on the other hand, a saintly recluse, bent only upon showing the way to a life of serene and cheerful virtue, took over the doctrine of the great physicist of Abdera, without any touch of dispassionate speculative interest, as that which promised most effectual relief from disturbing interests and cares, and especially from the disturbance generated by fear of the gods and of a life after death. He might have gone to the great Athenian idealists of the fourth century, the immortal masters not only of those who know, but of those who think and labour and create, whether in science or in poetry or in citizenship. But his aim was precisely to liberate from these distracting energies, and allure a weary generation from the forum and the workshop, even the studio of letters or of art, and the temples of the gods, into the choice seclusion of his garden—the garden of a soul at peace, fragrant with innocent and beautiful things. What Epicurus added of his own to Democritus' theory was an accommodation not to truth but to convenience ; and the measure of his scientific ardour is given by his easy toleration of conflicting explanations of the same phenomenon, provided they dispense with the intervention of the gods. While the measure of his attachment to poetry

is given by his counsel to his disciples to go past it with stopped ears, as by the siren's deadly song.

It was this scientific doctrine, adopted by Epicurus in the interest not of science but of his gospel of deliverance from the cares of superstition, that Lucretius took over with the fervour of discipleship. ✓ He was not, like Pope in the "Essay on Man," providing an elegant dress for philosophic ideas which he only half understood and abandoned in alarm when they threatened to be dangerous. He was the prophet of Epicureanism, and it is among the prophets of the faiths by which men live and die that we must seek a parallel to the passionate earnestness with which he proclaims to Memmius the saving gospel of Epicurus, - to that same Memmius who a few years later showed his piety to Epicurus' memory by destroying his house. It was the hope of pouring the light and joy of saving truth upon the mind of this rather obtuse Roman, his beloved friend, that Lucretius laboured, he tells us, through the silent watches of the night, seeking phrase and measure which might make deep and hidden things clear.¹ But Lucretius felt and thought also as a poet and in the temper of poetry. He was not *lending his pen* to a good cause, nor turning Greek science into Latin hexameters in order that they might be more vividly grasped or more readily remembered. He was conquering a new way in poetry ; striking out a virgin path which no foot before his had trod. For Empedocles had had far narrower aims. And he calls on the Muses for aid with as devout a faith in his poetic mission in the great adventure as Milton had when he summoned Urania or some greater Muse to be his guide while he attempted "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme". What we admire unreservedly in him, declares a great French poet who died only the other day, Sully-Prudhomme, is the breath of independence which sweeps through the entire work of this most robust and precise of poets.

We see the temper of the poet at the outset, in the wonderful transfiguration which the gentle recluse Epicurus undergoes in the ardent brain of his Roman disciple. For it was of this enemy of disturbing emotion, this quietist of paganism, this timid and debonnaire humanitarian, that Lucretius drew the magnificent and astonishing portrait which immediately follows the prologue of the *De Rerum Natura*. The Lucretian Epicurus is a Prometheus, - the heroic

¹ I. 140 f.

Greek who first of mortals dared to defy and withstand the monstrous tyrant Religion to her face. No fabled terror could appal him, no crashing thunder, nor the anger of heaven; these only kindled the more the eager courage of his soul, to be the first to break the bars of Nature's gates. So the living might of his soul prevailed, and he passed beyond the flaming walls of the world and traversed in mind and spirit the immeasurable universe; returning thence in triumph to tell us what can, and what cannot, come into being; having trampled under foot Religion who once crushed mankind, and lifted mankind in turn by his victory up to the height of heaven.

One might well surmise that a philosophy which a poet could thus ardently proclaim was itself, after all, not without the seeds and springs of poetry; and that Lucretius in choosing to expound it in verse was not staking everything on his power of making good radical defects of substance by telling surface decoration or brilliant digressions. He recognized, no doubt, a difference in popular appeal between his substance and his form, and in a famous and delightful passage compares himself to the physician who touches the edge of the bitter cup with honey, ensnaring credulous childhood to its own good. So, he tells Memmius, he is spreading the honey of the Muses over his difficult matter, that he may hold him by the charm of verse until the nature of things have grown clear to his sight. But Lucretius is here putting himself at the point of view of the indifferent layman, and especially of the rather obtuse layman whose interest he was with almost pathetic eagerness seeking to capture. One guesses that Memmius, like the boy, was by no means reconciled to the wormwood because it was prefaced with honey; and modern critics who, like Mommsen, condemn his choice of subject as a blunder, come near to adopting the resentful boy's point of view. But in the splendid lines which immediately precede, though they form part of the same apology to Memmius, the poet involuntarily betrays his own very different conception of the matter. The hope of glory, he says, has kindled in his breast the love of the Muses, "whereby inspired I am exploring a virgin soil of poetry hitherto untrodden by any foot. O the joy of approaching the unsullied springs, and quaffing them, O the joy of culling flowers unknown, whence may be woven a splendid wreath for my head, such as the Muses have arrayed no man's brows withal before, first because I am reporting on a great theme, and

undoing the tight knot of superstition from the minds of men ; and then because I convey dark matters in such transparent verse, touching everything with the Muses' charm."¹

Here, in spite of the last words, Lucretius clearly feels that his matter is something more than the wormwood which he overlays with honey ; it is a vast region of implicit poetry which he, first of poets, is going to discover and annex ; and he rests his claim to the poetic wreath he expects to win, in the first place upon this greatness of the subject matter itself, and secondly, not as the wormwood and honey theory would suggest, on the ingenious fancy which decorates or disguises it, but on the lucid style which allows it to shine in, as through a window, upon the ignorant mind.

III.

Let us then consider from this point of view the subject of Lucretius. This subject, as he conceives it, has two aspects. On the one side it is negative ;—an annihilating criticism of all the crude religion founded upon fear,—fear of the gods, fear of death and of something after death ; criticism delivered with remorseless power and culminating in the sinewy intensity of the terrible line

‘ Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum,’

which transfixes once for all the consecrated principle of *tabu* everywhere dominant in the primitive faiths, the product of man's cowardice, as magic is the product of his pride.

The other aspect is constructive ; the building up of the intellectual and moral framework of a worthy human life, by setting forth the true nature of the universe, the history of life, and the development of man ; in other words, the story of his struggle through the ages, with the obstacles opposed to him by the power of untamed nature, by wild beasts, storms, inundations, by the rivalry and antagonism of other men, and by the wild unreason in his own breast. Lucretius saw as clearly as any modern thinker that man's conduct of his life, whether in the narrow circle of domestic happiness and personal duty, or in the larger sphere of civic polity, must be based upon a comprehension of the external world and of the past through which we have grown to what we are ; and making allowance for his more limited resources and

¹ I. 922 f.

his more confined point of view, he carried it out with magnificent power. So that if his poem remains in nominal intention a didactic treatise, in its inner substance and purport it might better be described as a colossal epic of the universe, with man for its protagonist and the spectres of the gods for its vanquished foes ; and wanting neither the heroic exultations nor the tragic dooms, neither the melancholy over what passes nor the triumph in what endures, which go to the making of the greatest poetry.

These two aspects—criticism and construction—are thus most intimately bound together in the poem, but can yet be considered apart. And to each belongs its own peculiar and distinct vein of poetry. On the whole it is the former, at first sight so much less favourable to poetic purposes, which has most enthralled posterity. For the voice of Lucretius is here a distinctive, almost a solitary voice. The poets for the most part have been the weavers of the veil of dreams and visions in whose glamour the races of mankind have walked : but here came a poet, and one of the greatest, who rent the veil asunder and bade men gaze upon the nature of things naked and unadorned. And his austere chant of triumph as he pierces illusion and scatters superstition, has in it something more poignant and thrilling than many a song of voluptuous ecstasy or enchanted rhapsody. For after all, the passing of an old order of things and the coming of a new has always at least the interest of colossal drama, and cannot leave us unmoved, however baneful we may hold the old order to have been, however we may exult in the deliverance effected by the new. So Milton's celebration of the birth of Christ only reaches the heights of poetry when he is telling of the passing of the old pagan divinities :

The oracles are dumb,
No voice or hideous hum
Runs thro' the arched roof in words deceiving
Apollo from his shrine
Can no more divine.
With hollow shriek the sleep of Delphos leaving
No nightly trance, or breathed spell,
Inspires the pale eyed priest from the prophetic cell.

The lonely mountains o'er
 And the resounding shore,
 A voice of weeping heard and loud lament :
 From haunted spring and dale,
 Edged with poplar pale,
 The parting genius is with sighing sent ;
 With flower-inwoven tresses torn
 The nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thicket mourn.

Through the Christian's exultation there sounds, less consciously perhaps, but more clear, the Humanist scholar's sense of tragedy and pathos. In *Hyperion*, even more, we are made to feel the pathos of the passing of the fallen divinity of Saturn and his host ; and Hyperion himself, the sun-god of the old order of physical light, is more magnificently presented than Apollo, the sun-god of the new order of radiant intelligence and song. Lucretius, as we shall see, brings back the old divinity in a sublime way of his own ; but he feels the beneficence of the new order of scientific vision and inviolable law too profoundly to have any sense of pathos at the passing of the reign of superstition and caprice. He is rather possessed with flaming wrath as he recalls the towering evils of which that old regime had been guilty : the wrath of a prophet, more truly divine in spirit than the divinities he assailed, as Prometheus is more divine than Zeus. Again and again we are reminded, as we read his great invectives, not of the sceptics mocking all gods indiscriminately in the name of enlightened good sense, but of a Hebrew prophet, chastising those who sacrifice to the gods of the Gentiles, in the name of the God of righteousness who refuses to be worshipped with offerings of blood. There is surely a spirit not far remote from this in the indignant pity with which he tells, in a famous and splendid passage, the sacrifice of Iphigenia at the divine bidding, as the price of the liberation of the Grecian fleet on its way to Troy.

How often has fear of the gods begotten impious and criminal acts ! What else was it that led the chieftains of Greece, foremost of men, foully to stain the altar of Artemis with the blood of the maiden Iphigenia ? Soon as the victim's band was bound about her virgin locks, and she saw her father grief-stricken before the altar, and at his side the priests concealing the knife, and the onlookers shedding tears at the sight, dumb with fear she sank on her knees to the ground. And it availed her nothing at that hour that she had been the first to call the king by the name of father ; for she was caught up by the hands of men, and borne trembling to the altar ; not to

have a glad wedding hymn sung before her when these sacred rites were over, but to be piteously struck down, a victim, stained with her own stainless blood, by the hand of a father in the very flower of her bridal years; and all in order to procure a happy deliverance might be granted to the captive fleet. So huge a mass of evils has fear of the gods brought forth! [l. 84-101]

Thus the crucial proof of the badness of the old religions is derived from the hideous violence done in their name to the natural and beautiful pieties of the family.

Yet, with all his fierce aversion for this baneful fear, Lucretius feels profoundly how natural it is. His intense imagination enters into the inmost recesses of the human heart, and runs counter, as it were, to the argument of his powerful reason; riveting upon our senses with almost intolerable force the beliefs which he is himself seeking to dispel; so that though there is no trace of doubt or obscurity in his own mind, his words need only to be set in a different context to become a plea for that which he is using them to refute. Thus his very denunciation of the Stoic doctrine of an all-pervading God is conveyed in language of what one is again prompted to call Hebraic magnificence. "What power can rule the immeasurable All, or hold the reins of the great deep? who can revolve the heavens and warm the earth with ethereal fires? who can be everywhere present, making dark the sky and thrilling it with clashing sound . . . ? [v. 1234.]" Do we not seem to listen to an echo of the ironical questions of the Jahveh of the Book of Job?

There he feels only scorn for the believer, in spite of his involuntary imaginative hold upon the belief. But in another passage we see the poet himself shudder with the fear that his logic is in the act of plucking up by the roots:

When we gaze upward at the great vault of heaven, and the empyrean inlaid with shining stars, and consider the paths of sun and moon; then the dread will start into life within us let haply it be the immeasurable might of gods which moves the blazing stars along their diverse way. For the poverty of our reason tempts us to wonder whether the world was not once begotten, and whether it be destined to perish when its ceaseless movements have worn it out, or endowed with immortal life glide on perpetually, defying all the might of time. And then what man is there whose heart does not shrink with terror of the gods, whose limbs do not creep with fear, when the parched earth trembles at the lightning stroke,

and the roar of thunder rolls through the sky! Do not the peoples shudder, and haughty kings quake with fear, lest for some foul deed or arrogant speech a dire penalty has been incurred and the hour be come when it must be paid? For when the might of the hurricane sweeps the commander of a fleet before it along the seas, with all his force of legions and elephants, does he not approach the gods with prayers for their favour and helping winds; and all in vain, for often enough none the less he is caught in the whirlpool and flung into the jaws of death? So utterly does some hidden power seem to consume the works of man, and to trample and deride all the symbols of his glory and his wrath [v. 1194 f.].

But beyond the fear of what the gods may do to us on earth, lay another more insidious and ineluctable fear, the dread of what may befall us after death. It was a main part of Lucretius's purpose to meet this by showing that death meant dissolution, and dissolution unconsciousness; but men continued to dread, and this is the reasoning, equally inconclusive and brilliant, with which he confronts them:—

Therefore since death annihilates, and bars out from being altogether him whom evils might befall, it is plain that in death there is nothing for us to fear, and that a man cannot be unhappy who does not exist at all, and that it matters not a jot whether a man has been born, when death the deathless has swallowed up life that dies.

Therefore, when you see a man bewail himself that after death his body will rot, or perish in flames or in the jaws of beasts, his profession clearly does not ring true, and there lurks a secret sting in his heart, for all his denial that he believes there is any feeling in the dead. For, I take it, he does not fulfil his promise, nor follow out his principle, and sever himself out and out from life, but unconsciously makes something of himself survive. For when as a living man he imagines his future fate, and sees himself devoured by birds and beasts, he pities himself; for he does not distinguish between himself and the others, nor sever himself from the imagined body, but imagines himself to be it, and impregnates it with his own feeling. Hence he is indignant that he has been created mortal, nor sees that there will not in reality be after death another self, to grieve as a living being that he is dead, and feel pangs as he stands by, that he himself is lying there being mangled or consumed.

Then he supposes the dying man's friends to condole with him:

Now no more thy glad home shall welcome thee, nor a beloved wife, nor sweet children run to snatch kisses, touching thy heart with secret delight. No more wilt thou be prosperous in thy doings, no more be a shelter to thy dear ones. A single, cruel day has taken

from thee, hapless man, all the need of life. So they tell you, but they forget to add that neither for any one of these things wilt thou any longer feel desire [lil. 863].

IV.

So much then for the first aspect of Lucretius's poem, the criticism of the old religions. Most of the recognized and famous "poetry" of the book is connected, like the passages I have quoted, with this negative side of his creed. But I am more concerned to show that a different and not less noble vein of poetry was rooted in the rich positive appetencies of his nature ; in his acute and exquisite senses ; in the vast and sublime ideas which underlay his doctrine of the world ; in his intense apprehension of the *zest* of life ; and, on the other hand, penetrating, like an invisible but potent spirit the texture of his reasoned unconcern, his profound, unconfessed sense of the pathos of death, his melancholy in the presence of the doom of universal dissolution which he foresaw for the world and for mankind.

Let us look first at the main constructive idea : the atomic theory of Leucippus and Democritus, taken over by Epicurus and expounded by Lucretius.

For this theory was in effect, and probably in intention, a device for overcoming that antithesis of the One and the Many, of Permanence and Change, of which I have spoken. The Eleatics had declared that pure Being was alone real, and denied Change and Motion ; Heraclitus declared that nothing was real but Change, and the only perpetuity "flux". The founder of atomism, Leucippus, showed that it was possible to hold, in the phrase of Browning's philosophic *Don Juan*, that there is in "all things change, and permanence as well," by supposing that shifting and unstable world of the senses, where all things die and are born, to be composed of uncreated and indestructible elements. Underlying the ceaseless fluctuations of Nature, and life as we see them, lay a continuity of eternal substance, of which they were the passing modes ; one of the greatest of philosophical conceptions, Mr. Santayana has called it, but one also appealing profoundly to the specifically poetic intuition which I have described. Whether the permanent apprehended through the flux of sense be a spiritual substance like Plato's ideas, or Shelley's "white radiance of eternity," or whether it be the constant form and function of the flowing river, as in Wordsworth's Duddon sonnet ; or whether, as here, it be a background

of material particles perpetually combining and resolved, we have the kind of intuition which gives the thrill of poetry ; we discover " sweep in the concise, and depth in the clear," infinite perspectives open out in the moment and in the point, and however remote the temper of Spinozan mysticism may be, we yet in some sort see things " in the light of eternity".

In Lucretius this conception found a mind capable of being ravished by its imaginative grandeur, as well as of pursuing it indefatigably through the thorniest mazes of mechanical proof. The contagious fervour which breathes through his poem is no mere ardour of the disciple bent on winning converts, or the joy of the literary craftsman as his hexameters leap forth glowing on the anvil ; it is the sacred passion of one who has had a sublime vision of life and nature, and who bears about the radiance of it into all the work to which he has set his hand. It is not because of anything that Lucretius adds to Epicurus—in theory he really adds nothing at all—that the impression produced by his poem differs so greatly from that of all we know—in fragments and at second hand, it is true—of Epicurus's own writings. The ultimate principles are the same, but the accent is laid at a different point. The parochial timidities of Epicurus have left their traces on the Roman's page, but they appear as hardly more than rudimentary survivals among the native inspirations of a man of heroic mettle and valour, Roman tenacity, and native sweep of mind. He cannot quite break free from some speculative foibles which show the Master's shallow opportunism at its worst,—such as the dictum that the sun is about as large as it looks, a lamp hung a little above the earth, and daily lighted and put out ; but he becomes himself when he lets his imagination soar into the infinites of time and space which his faith opens out or leaves room for. It is a triumph of poetry as well as of common sense when he scoffs at the Stoic dogma of a Space which abruptly comes to an end ; when he stations an archer at the barrier and ironically bids him shoot his arrow into the nothingness beyond. Or in more sombre mood, how grave an intensity he puts into a common thought, like that of the end of life, by the sublimely terrible epithet *immortal* which he applies to death :—

Mortalem vitam Mors cum immortalis ademit [III. 869].

or into a mere reminder that birth and death are always with us, by

making us feel the endless concomitant succession through the ages of funeral wailings, and the cry of the new-born child [ll. 578]. He accepts without question the swerving of the atoms, devised by Epicurus

child and man of genius at once to refute the Stoic dogma of necessity ; but what possesses his mind and imagination is not these intrusions of caprice but the great continuities and uniformities of existence, which follow from the perpetual dissolution and remaking of life. "Rains die, when father ether has tumbled them into the lap of mother earth ; but then goodly crops spring up and trees laden with fruit ; and by them we and the beasts are fed, and joyous cities teem with children and the woods ring with the song of young birds" [l. 250 f.].

Only, as such passages show, Lucretius grasps these uniformities and continuities not as theoretic abstractions, but as underlying conditions of the teeming multiplicity and joyous profusion of living Nature. His senses, imagination, and philosophic intellect, all phenomenally acute and alert, wrought intimately together ; and he enters into and exposes the life of the individual thing with an intensity of insight and a realistic precision and power which quicken us with its warm pulse, and burn its image upon our brain, without ever relaxing our consciousness that it is part of an endless process, and the incidental expression of an unalterable law. For him, indeed, as for Dante, individuality is an intrinsic part of law, and law of individuality. Every being has its place and function, its "deep fixed boundaries" (*terminus aucte haerens*). The very stone, for Dante, cleaves to the spot where it lies. And the Roman as well as the philosopher in Lucretius scornfully contrasts with this Nature of minute and ubiquitous law the fluid and chaotic world of myth, where anything might become anything [cf. v. 126 f.].

V.

None the less, his conception of the nature of the process itself does insensibly undergo a change. In the mind of an exponent so richly endowed and so transparently sincere, the hidden flaw in his system could not but at some point disturb its imposing coherence. Atomism could not at bottom explain life, and life poured with too abounding a tide through the heart and brain of Lucretius not to sap in some degree the authority of his mechanical calculus, and to lend a surreptitious

persuasiveness to inconsistent analogies derived from the animated soul. Without ostensibly disturbing the integrity of his Epicurean creed, such analogies have, in two ways, infused an alien colour into his poetry and alien implications into his thought. In the first place, he feels, as such abounding natures will, that life—“the mere living”—is somehow very good, in spite of all the evils it brings in its train, and death pathetic in spite of all the evils from which it sets us free. When he is demonstrating that the world cannot have been made by gods, he set forth its grave inherent flaws of structure and arrangement with merciless trenchancy—*tantā stat praeedita culpa* [v. 199]; and like Lear, he makes the new-born child wail because he is come into a world where so many griefs await him. And no one ever urged with more passionate eloquence that it is unreasonable to fear to die. None the less, phrases charged with a different feeling about life continually escape him. He speaks of the *praeclara mundi natura* [v. 157]. To begin to live is to “rise up into the divine borders of light” [l. 20]. And secondly, despite his philosophical assurance, incessantly repeated, that birth and death are merely different aspects of the same continuous mechanical process, and that nothing receives life except by the death of something else, “*Alid ex alio reficit natura, nec ullam Rem gigni patitur, nisi morte adiuta aliena*” [l. 264, etc.], he cannot suppress suggestions that the creative energy of the world is akin to that which with conscious desire and will brings forth the successive generations of Man. And so, in the astonishing and magnificent opening address, the poet who was about to demonstrate that the gods lived eternally remote from the life of men, calls upon Venus, the legendary mother of his own race, as the divine power ever at work in this teeming universe, the giver of increase, bringing all things to birth, from the simplest corn blade to the might and glory of the Roman Empire :

Mother of the Roman race, delight of gods and men, benign Venus, who under the gliding constellations of heaven fillest with thy presence the sea with its ships and the earth with its fruits, seeing that by thy power all the races of living things are conceived and come to being in the light of day, before thee O goddess the winds take flight, and the clouds of heaven at thy coming, at thy feet the brown earth sheds her flowers of a thousand hues, before thee the sea breaks into rippling laughter, and the untroubled sky glows with radiant light [l. 1 f.].

So grave and impassioned an appeal cannot be treated as mere

thetical ornament. If we call it figure, it is figure of the kind which is not a "poetical" substitute for prose, but conveys something for which no other terms are adequate. Lucretius, the exponent of Epicurus, doubtless intended no heresy against the Epicurean theology, but Lucretius, the poet, was carried by his vehement imagination to an apprehension of the creative energies of the world so intense and acute that the great symbol of Venus rendered it with more veracity than all that calculus of atomic movements which he was about to expound, and by which his logical intellect with perfect sincerity believed it to be adequately explained.

Far less astonishing than his bold rehabilitation of the goddess of Love is his fetishistic feeling for the Earth, the legendary mother of men. For him too, as for primeval myth, she is the "universal mother," who in her fresh youth brought forth flower and tree, and bird and beast; from whose body sprang finally the race of man itself; nay, he tells us how the infants crept forth, "from wombs rooted in the soil," and how, wherever this happened, earth yielded naturally through her pores a liquor most like to milk, "even as nowadays every woman when she has given birth is filled with sweet milk, because all that current of nutriment streams towards the breast" [V. 788 f.].

It is true that elsewhere Lucretius speaks with rationalistic condescension of the usage which calls the Earth a mother and divine, as a phrase like Bacchus for wine or Ceres for corn, permissible so long as no superstitious fear is annexed to it [lt. 652 f.]. But it is plain that the Earth's motherhood had a grip upon his poet's imagination quite other than could be exerted by any such tag of poetic diction. Doubtless the fervour with which he insists on it—"Therefore again and again Earth is rightly called Mother seeing that she brought forth the race of men and every beast and bird in its due season,"—is not wholly due to poetic motives. He is eager to refute the Stoic doctrine that men were sprung from heaven. But the poet in him is, all the same, entranced by the sublimity of the conception he is urging, and he describes it with an afflatus which dwarfs that Stoic doctrine, and makes the splendid legend of Cybele the Earth Mother, elaborated by the Greek poets, seem puny with all its beauty. "In the beginning Earth hath in herself the elements whence watersprings pouring forth their coolness perpetually renew the bound-

less Sea, and whence fires arise, making the ground in many places hot, and belching forth the surpassing flames of *Ætna*. Then she bears shining corn and glad woodlands for the support of men, and rivers and leaves and shining pastures for the beasts that haunt the hills. Wherefore she is called the mother of the gods and mother of beasts and men." [II. 589 f.]

This all-creating Earth is far enough no doubt from the benign Nature of Wordsworth, who moulds her children by silent sympathy. But it is not so remote from the Earth of Meredith, the Mother who brings Man "her great venture" forth, bears him on her breast and nourishes him there, but "more than that embrace, that nourishment, she cannot give".

He may entreat, aspire,
He may despair, and she has never heed.
She drinking his warm sweat will soothe his need,
Not his desire.

Meredith too sees man, in dread of her, clutching at invisible powers, as Lucretius's sea-captain in the storm makes vows to the gods. And Meredith's thought that man rises by "spelling at" her laws is no less Lucretian. But Meredith's story of Earth is full of hope, like his story of man. It is perpetual advance. With Lucretius it is otherwise.

For the Earth is not only our Mother ; she is our tomb [II. 1148 f.]. And the eternal energy of creation is not only matched by the eternal energy of dissolution, but here and now is actually yielding ground to it. The Earth, so prolific in her joyous youth, is now like a woman who has ceased to bear, "worn out by length of days" [V. 820 f.] In the whole universe birth and death absolutely balance, the equation of mechanical values is never infringed ; the universe has no history, only a continuous substitution of terms. But each living thing has a history, it knows the exultation of onset and the melancholy of decline ; and its fear of death is not cancelled by the knowledge that in that very moment and in consequence of that very fact, some other living thing will be born. And thus Lucretius, feeling for our Earth as a being very near to us, and with which the issues of our existence are involved, applies the doctrine to her without shrinking indeed, but not without a human shudder. The Earth had a beginning, and ineluctable reason forces us to conclude that she will have an end, and that not by a gradual evanescence or dispersion, but by a sudden, terrific catastrophe, as in a great earthquake, or world conflagration [V. 95 f.].

And he feels this abrupt extinction of the Earth and its inhabitants to be tragic, notwithstanding that extinction is, by his doctrine, only the condition of creation, and that at the very moment of her ruin, some other earth will be celebrating its glorious birth. Earth has for him a life-history, a biography, and he forgets that she is strictly but a point at which the eternal drift of atoms thickened for a time to a cluster, to be dispersed again. Thus we see how this mechanical system, ardently embraced by a poet, working freely upon him, and itself coloured and transformed by his mind, stirred in him two seemingly opposed kinds of poetic emotion at once : — the sublime sense of eternal existence, and the tragic pathos of sudden doom and inexorable passing away.

Hence the *melancholy* that in Lucretius goes along with an enormous sense of life. To say that he puts the "Nevermore" of romantic sentimentality in the place of that dispassionate "give and take" of mechanics would do wrong to the immense virility which animates every line of this athlete among poets. Of the cheap melancholy of discontent he knows as little as of the cheap satisfaction of complacency, or of that literary melancholy, where the sigh of Horace, or Ronsard, or Herrick, over the passing of roses and all other beautiful things covers a sly diplomatic appeal to the human rosebud to be gathered while still there is time. No, the melancholy of Lucretius is like that of Durer's "Melancholia," "the sadness of strong intellect and far-reaching vision as it contemplates the setting of the sun of time and the ebbing of the tides of mortality ; or like Wordsworth's mournful music of dissolution, only to be heard by an ear emancipated from vulgar joys and fears ; or like the melancholy of Keats, the veiled goddess who hath her shrine in the very temple of delight, the *amara dulced*, in Lucretius's own yet more pregnant words, which lurks in the very sweetness of the flower.

Thus our "scientific poet" appears in an extraordinary if not unique way to have united the functions and temper and achievement of science and poetry. He "knew the causes of things," and could set them forth with marvellous precision and resource, and the knowledge filled him with lofty joy as of one standing secure above the welter of doubt and fear in which the mass of men pass their lives. To have reached this serene pinnacle of intellectual security seemed to his greatest follower Virgil a happiness beyond the reach of his

own more tender and devout genius, and he commemorated it in splendid verses which Matthew Arnold in our own day applied to Goethe :

And he was happy, if to know
Causes of things, and far below
His feet to see the lurid flow
Of terror and insane distress
And headlong fate, be happiness.

There is, it may be, something that repels us, something slightly inhuman, in this kind of lonely happiness, and Lucretius does little to counteract that impression when he himself compares it, in another famous passage, to the satisfaction of one who watches the struggle of a storm-tost ship from the safe vantage-ground of the shore. Yet Lucretius is far from being the lonely egoist that such a passage might suggest ; his poem itself was meant as a helping hand to lift mankind to his own security : he knew what devoted friendship was, and we have pleasant glimpses of him wandering with companions among the mountains,¹ or sharing a rustic meal stretched at ease on the grass by a running brook.² Lucretius like his master had no social philosophy, and it is his greatest deficiency as a thinker ; but he was not poor in social feeling. His heart went out to men, as a physician, not coldly diagnosing their disease, but eager to cure them.

And so his feeling for Nature, for the universe of things, though rooted in his scientific apprehension, is not bounded by it. He seizes upon the sublime conceptions which his science brought to his view, — the permanent substance amid perennial change, the infinity of space and time, — and his vivid mind turns these abstractions into the radiant vision of a universe to which the heaven of heavens, as the old poets had conceived it, “ was but a veil ”. But he went further, and shadowed forth, if half-consciously and in spite of himself, the yet greater poetic thought, of a living power pervading the whole, drawing the elements of being together by the might of an all-permeating Love. And thus Lucretius, the culminating expression of the scientific thinking of Democritus and of the gospel of Epicurus, foreshadows Virgil, whom he so deeply influenced, and prophesies faintly but perceptibly of Dante and of Shelley ; as his annihilating exposure of the religions founded upon fear insensibly prepared the way for the religions of hope and love.

¹ IV. 575.

² II. 29.



2 A BOOKE IN ENGLYSH METRE, of the Great Marchaunt man called "Dives Pragmaticus". . . . 1563. . . . With an introduction by Percy E. Newberry; and remarks on the vocabulary and dialect with a glossary by Henry C. Wyld. 1910. 4to, pp. xxviii, 16. 5s. net.

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